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CRUELTY TO CHILDREN.

OUR last national Census, in 1880, showed that the number of children in the United States under sixteen years of age was over twenty millions; of whom 10,158,954 were boys, and 9,884,705 were girls. From a political standpoint, the future status of the nation will largely depend on the proper physical and intellectual training of these children, yearly increasing in number, who before long will constitute the sovereign people of the Republic. In a social and moral point of view, the well-being of society imperatively demands that the atmosphere in which they live and the treatment which they receive from those having their custody or intrusted with their care, shall be such as to insure habits of industry, temperance, honesty, and chastity. Cruelty to children produces mental and physical disease, and the prevention of such cruelty is a matter, therefore, of grave public importance.

Cruelty has been legally defined to embrace "every act, omission or neglect whereby physical pain, suffering or death is caused, or permitted;" and it is divisible into those cases which the law reaches, and those which it does not reach. Thus, for instance, among the intelligent and educated, brutality to a child is viewed with horror, and corporal punishment is something almost unknown. The pride of the parent in the offspring frequently amounts almost to idolatry. Many such parents treat their children as though they were rare exotic plants; and while the children are carefully guarded against temptations common to their age, and are clothed, fed, and educated with the utmost care, their nurture in other respects is not always wisely directed. A child of delicate, nervous constitution, with a developement of intellect beyond its years, is too often forced by over-education into a premature growth of its mental faculties to the injury of its bodily health. The

strain is not apparent at first, but as the child grows older it becomes more susceptible to the inroads of disease, and too often the very care taken to develop the intellect strikes a fatal blow at the corresponding development of the body. Again, children delicately nurtured and of a nervous temperament are unusually impressible under the behavior of their parents. Where, for instance, the harsh word checks the child's love, exhibited perhaps at an inopportune moment, an impression is made on the memory and character of the child which is not easily effaced. The idea never seems to occur to many persons that the life of childhood is a life of itself. Children live in a world of their own. They have their fancies, their peculiar likes and dislikes, their day-dreams, their fears and their hopes. Day by day, as this child-life goes on, the character is being formed and molded. Their physical condition has everything to do with their conduct, and too often what is attributed by the parent to perversity or temper, is but the precursor or symptom of physical disease. The maladies of childhood are usually ushered in by an unaccountable waywardness of temper; and a child is frequently punished for a physical irritation over which it has no control, the cause of which subsequently becomes apparent. So, too, any neglect by parents of their children's interests is keenly felt by the children themselves. The weakening of parental authority at the present day, so often complained of, will be found in many cases due to the fact that the old adage that "children should be seen and not heard," is the governing maxim, instead of that constant attention to the education, the wants and the wishes of the child, which renders the tie between it and its parents stronger than adamant, and lasting through life. The stinging reproof, too often uttered in momentary anger by the parent, and frequently undeserved because inquiry was not properly made into the facts before it was administered, and the biting, cutting sarcasm, intended to convey disapproval of conduct, will, with a child of tender susceptibilities, injure its moral and affectional nature far more than the blow which constitutes actual brutality. These are cases of cruelty which the law does not reach. Yet it wisely entrusts to the parent the care of the child in its earlier years, because in the great majority of cases the parental instincts and the natural bond of affection are the very best safe-guards for its welfare.

A very different phase of cruelty exists in the case of many

of the children of the laboring classes. Occupied the entire day in his ordinary avocation, and in providing for the needs of his family, the hard-working laboring man has but little time to bestow upon his offspring. They are usually left to their mother, who, perhaps, is called upon by the demands of an increasing family to labor herself for their sustenance. Too often they are allowed to roam at large, and to select their own associates; and experience has shown that the votaries of vice are always on the alert to lure innocent and unsuspecting children into vice and crime, before even their parents are conscious of their danger. Sad cases of this character appear in the records of our societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and of our criminal courts. Girls ceasing to be children and becoming women fall into vice before they really know what vice is. Boys with originally good instincts are beguiled, through the allurements of dime novels and of blood-and-thunder dramas at cheap theaters, into the company of thieves and vagabonds; and the petty theft which soon consigns them to a reformatory institution, while it may perhaps be the occasion of checking a vicious career, stamps a brand of crime upon the character, destined in future to produce deplorable results. One of the worst evils to which children of the laboring classes are subjected is their employment at a very early age in occupations detrimental to their health, and positively injurious to their vitality and moral growth. The temptation to parents to utilize their children for the purpose of enlarging their scanty means of subsistence, regardless of the injury to the morals, the intellect, or the physical health of the child, is so strong that the latter considerations rarely enter into their thoughts. The evil in this respect is a growing one, and if allowed to continue will endanger the welfare of the community by impoverishing the material out of which the American mechanic — so justly relied on as the main-spring of the nation's wealth — is made. Factories are crowded with children of very tender years who are compelled to work at starvation wages, frequently over ten hours a day, in close, confined rooms, until at last the physical system falls into premature decay, and consumption, with its attendant and kindred diseases, ensues. According to the census of 1870, the whole number of children of both sexes between the ages of ten and fifteen years pursuing "gainful" occupations was 739,164.

The last census of 1880 enlarges this number to 1,118,356—an increase of 379,192 in ten years.

Too many of our law-makers, perhaps with the best intentions, but certainly as if the strain upon the physical system were not enough, make the only condition precedent to the employment of children in factories the onerous one of requiring proof that they shall have first received a common-school education, which simply means that the intellectual strength of the child is to be taxed as well as its physical powers. How soon the adult mechanics will interfere by their representatives in the Legislatures, to prevent the employment of children in this manner, which practically results in the exclusion of adult labor from the manufacture of articles made by these factories, remains to be seen. Thousands of children yearly die from diseases contracted in these unhealthy employments. Our nation, in this respect, is far behind Europe in the protection of these helpless children. In France, as long ago as 1841, stringent laws were passed to remedy the evil. England was not slow to follow the example, and upon the English law the present French legislation is based, which absolutely precludes the employment of children in the production of dangerous and poisonous toys, drugs, explosive materials, and other articles, the manufacture of which cannot be conducted except at the peril of the life or limb of the child. You have only to go through the large hospitals in any city of this country to find a number of children suffering from mutilations of hands and fingers, resulting from their employment, at a tender age, in the management of machinery which requires thought and skill to operate; and to see how the wisdom of the French law is ignored in this country. Notable efforts have already been made in many States to reach the evil, but as yet our legislation is very crude in this respect; for, while the subject has attracted the attention of the State Boards of Health, and State Medical Boards, the local factory interests have succeeded in so weakening the measures suggested for the prevention of the evil, as to render the laws, when enacted, practically inoperative.

Equally injurious to the children of the laboring classes is their utilization by their parents in theatrical and operatic shows, acrobatic feats, and other occupations remunerative in their character, apparently harmless, and yet more deadly in their

results upon the moral and physical health of the child than any of the evils already enumerated. To the hard-working man it seems comparatively an easy thing that his little girl should sing in juvenile opera, or perform night after night upon the stage in some minor part, with apparently little effort, before an applauding audience. Indeed, many are rather proud of the prominence which they absurdly suppose is thereby given to their family, and it pleases their vanity to see their children billed as youthful prodigies and "phenomena." The admiring audience in front of the stage applaud with delight the precocious talent of the child. The press, which is largely dependent on the advertisements of theatrical agents, often criticises with severity any attempt to deprive the public of what is termed its legitimate amusement by suppressing these exhibitions. And the plea is made even by those who honestly uphold the dramatic profession, that such exhibitions are necessary for the development of true dramatic talent, and that, where the indigent circumstances of the parents apparently require it, charity ought to encourage the children in such a method of earning their livelihood. But look at the other side of the question: the very moment the curtain rises at a theater, a draft of hot air blows from the audience on the stage, frequently paralyzing temporarily the vocal chords of the actors. When the curtain falls, the cold air from the flies descends with equal rapidity, and the children, who a moment before were exposed half-naked in the performance of some act of physical exertion, are chilled to the bone before they have a chance to recover from the sudden change resulting from this alteration of the temperature. Night after night they are subjected to these changes. During the day they sleep as best they can. Their nervous systems soon become disorganized, digestion is rapidly impaired; late work necessitates late suppers, and the associations into which they are brought very soon lead to loss of modesty on the part of the girls, and early dissipation on the part of the boys. The careful student of this phase of cruelty has only to look at the results. The career of these children can be traced with painful accuracy from the time when they first perform in some juvenile operatic troupe, to their graduation in the song and dance business at a theater of lower grade than that where they originally appeared, and finally, when broken in health and enervated by dissipation and disease, to their appearance at the very lowest class

of dives and in dime museums. Hardly a case can be cited where children thus prematurely utilized for the purposes of the stage have ever risen to a high position in the histrionic art. There are some, it is true, who shine as stars in the dramatic profession, who began their stage career early in life, but these are rare exceptions.

Now, these cases of cruelty the law only partially reaches. In some instances the statute explicitly forbids the exhibition. In others it is difficult to prove specific, actual physical injury to the child, because the process of enervation is slow and the development of the seeds of disease too often insidious. Yet only recently one of the most gifted children on the stage, who played month after month as the adjunct of a well-known variety actor, died suddenly at the close of the performance, as was well stated by one of the papers which chronicled her death in a touching elegy, "in an atmosphere uncongenial to her growth." The public needs education on this subject. So long as persons of culture and refinement can derive pleasure from the performances of children, without reflecting on the injury which those performances occasion the child, there is but little hope of public sentiment being enlisted against these practices. The glare of the foot-lights constitutes a dividing line between the false view entertained by the audience and the painful results concentrated in the person of the child, and sure to ensue. Yet reflecting people would hesitate to place their own children in a position where, night after night, such a constant strain would be put upon them, and the golden rule seems to be entirely forgotten.

Let us look at this a moment. The law charges the parent with the care of the child during its minority. It does not authorize the utilization of the child at the expense of its health, merely for the purpose of putting money in the pockets of the parent. There the root of the evil lies. There the temptation is the most difficult to be resisted, and there is precisely where it is most difficult to protect the child, because of the difficulty in making the uneducated parent see that the performances are ruinous to the child. Just here the press should step in and protect the children. Unfortunately, theatrical influences to-day are too potent with the press. Too often the press sides with the audience and encourages the child, who is represented as being fond of the life it leads—as if children of tender years were competent to judge for themselves in the mat-

ter. What child does not cry for what it wants, no matter how hurtful the result may be? And who relies on the judgment of a child as of any value, even where its own interests are concerned?

Lastly, the cases of actual brutality are deserving of notice. There are those who gratify their animal instincts and passions, without regard to the consequences entailed thereby upon their offspring. Intemperance, vice, and crime are rife; and unless the children be rescued speedily from the suffering and neglect to which the vices of their parents necessarily subject them, premature disease, mental and physical, is certain to be engendered; and the statistics of crime show that the inevitable result of such treatment is to swell the criminal classes. The child of the outcast and the criminal has no home. The blow, the curse, the drunken brawl, the threat of punishment unless crime is committed, the ignoring of decency, of education, and of religion, point to but one result. Fortunately for these unhappy children, the humane of both sexes and of all classes are not lax in their efforts to reform and rescue them from their lives of sin, misery, and helplessness. The very women of society who are often reproached with being alike heartless and frivolous, respond in the most liberal manner, and devote more of their time than is dreamed of in aid of the wretched children of the poor. No appeal to a woman's heart for aid to rescue a child who is cruelly treated has yet met with a repulse. The inherent maternal instinct predominates over every other sentiment or passion; and the array of institutions in this country supported by both men and women for the rescue of the helpless, the outcast, and the lost attests the fondness of the American people for the children of the community; for in no other country are laws in such cases more stringent or more thoroughly enforced, although much legislation on the subject is yet needed. A wise experience has shown the necessity of creating societies for the prevention of cruelty to children, to enforce these laws. The duty of public officials in such matters, except in glaring cases, too often is neglected. But the records of these societies show that the humane and the intelligent, in every city and State where the organizations exist, are unswerving in their efforts to secure to little children that consideration by the community which their future so imperatively demands. Until some better mode of reaching the evil is pointed out, the work of these child-saving

societies deserves the support of every humane person. They are the dread of all who practice cruelty to children; they incur the resentment of those who are unable to control their action by political, pecuniary, or personal influences; but their work speaks for itself, and illustrates more strikingly than any other creation of the American people the crystallization of the humanity of the age in a most concise, compact, and efficacious form.

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